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THE CONCEPT OF NEGRO INFERIORITY  
IN AMERICAN THOUGHT

## THE CONCEPT OF NEGRO INFERIORITY IN AMERICAN THOUGHT

Numerous causes have been presented for the submerged status of the Negro in the United States. His disadvantaged economic and social position has been very generally considered as a basic influence conditioning his status. Race prejudice, however, can grow out of a rationalization of ideas as well as out of a difference in cultural background or be motivated by economic determinism. Deeper still in the popular consciousness than much of the material causation, and equally as basic, has been the psychological frame of reference into which the Negro has been fitted by American thought. Beginning with stereotyped ideas of an inferior being, conclusions resulting in an inferior status are the inevitable result. Ideas are the expression of social forces and are not independent in themselves. They are motivated by social, economic, class and political interests and influences. They are to be judged not only by their internal meaning and validity but also by the uses which are made of them by demagogues, popularizers and opinion-makers. However unreasonable and absurd they may seem to contemporaries today, they may have had definite historical consequences as a result of their ready acceptance by an uncritical public opinion. This principle is illustrated by the material written concerning Negro inferiority.

A consistent and continuous effort has been made during the history of the United States to present American Negroes as inferior beings and as a folk different from the normal American stock. Their biological inferiority and racial inequality have been readily accepted because they have been so treated by so many American thinkers. From the earliest colonial periods through the Civil War to the present time, one general belief has been dominant in the mind

of the American people concerning the Negro. Conclusions have been drawn from differences in color, physique and other apparently inherited or acquired characteristics, which have been regarded as inescapable. Then, too, with variations in these physical evidences of race, the question remains unanswered as to what is a Negro. Even some of those who were the friends of the Negro people regarded them at times with the hopeful assurance, often reemphasized by religious convictions based upon revivalism, that they would ultimately improve and make progress during the advancing years.

In this brief survey, attention will be devoted to the purposeful effort to show the inferiority of the Negro by direct reference and printed proof. No effort will be made to use fictional literature, the novel, poetry or the drama and the stage. Non-fictional material, pamphlets, tracts, speeches, sermons, addresses and books have been used in this study of American thought of the Negro.

The concept of Negro inferiority has been supported in various ways through the years. Weak and ineffectual have been the replies. Briefly, there are obviously several main periods in the development of this concept. The first is the colonial era to the period of the controversy over the Rights of Man. The second begins with the launching of the new government and ends about 1850. The third has its beginning about 1850 and closes with the Civil War and Reconstruction. The last period since the Civil War and Reconstruction can be divided into several subdivisions. This is the period of present-day propaganda, in which pseudo-scientists and politicians seeking selfish ends search vainly for support of a racial hypothesis, which will keep the races apart and maintain the vaunted superiority of the one and the alleged inferiority of the other.

Early references to Negro inferiority begin with citations to Africa and the Africans, because Negroes are first seen in connection with the African slave trade. The peo-



ple of the English colonies were influenced by the opinions of travelers and traders in slaves, who had visited Africa, since they themselves had few contacts at first with Negroes. One of these, John Barbot in 1682, stated that he found Africa in the west a land of war, slavery and barbarism.<sup>1</sup> The peoples were engaged in barbaric practises. The tribes made wars upon one another and attempted to enslave the conquered. These slaves were "severely and barbarously treated." It was quite easy for him to conclude that Africans would receive an inestimable blessing if they were transported to the colonies and Christianized.

Even in the first significant pamphlet written against slavery in the English colonies, there is a sense of difference which the author cannot hide. Judge Samuel Sewall published his pamphlet *The Selling of Joseph*, June 24, 1700. It was intended as an expression of opposition to slavery and the slave trade. He answered the argument about bringing Africans to America to Christianize them by stating that evil should not be committed in order that good might result. He believed, however, that there was a Scriptural basis for slavery, although this did not make valid the sale of men. He stated:

"These Blackamores are of the Posterity of Cham and therefore are under the curse of slavery. Gen. 9:25, 26, 27."<sup>2</sup>

Sewall did not fail to note that Negroes were incapable of becoming a part of the American people. He wrote:

"There is such a disparity in their conditions, colour and hair, that they can never embody with us, grow up into orderly Families, to the Peopling of the Land; but still remain in our Body Politick as a Kind of extravasate blood."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "John Barbot's Description of Guinea," in Elizabeth Donnan's *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*. Vol. I, pp. 288-289.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Sewall, "The Selling of Joseph," *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections*, 1863-1864, pp. 161-165.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

This opinion occurs in the first pamphlet against the slave trade.

In an answer to Sewall's pamphlet, John Saffin in 1701 published "*A Brief and Candid Answer to a Late Printed Sheet, Entitled 'The Selling of Joseph'.*" Saffin stated firmly his belief in the inferiority of the Negro, because there was a divine plan of inequality of men. He contended good was attained by bringing African heathens to a Christian country. He believed that the Negro character was different. A phrase indicates his belief in this respect:

"Cowardly and cruel are those Blacks Innate  
Prone to Revenge, Imp of Inverterate hate.  
He that exasperates them, soon espies  
Mischief and Murder in their very eyes  
Libidinous, Deceitful, False and Rude.  
The Spume Issue of Ingratitude  
The Premises considered, all may tell  
How never good Joseph they are parallel."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the period of the controversy over the Rights of Man and the revolutionary doctrines of liberty, references to the inferiority of the Negro continued to appear. At the commencement exercises of Harvard University in 1773, a debate was held on the legality of the slave trade. The affirmative speaker defended among other points, "the agreement of the law of nations with the idea of slavery in general, in opposition to that principle of natural equality which is so zealously contended for by the advocates for universal liberty."<sup>5</sup>

In the same year, 1773, Richard Nisbet wrote his *Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture*. In this work, he expressed direct belief in the inferiority of the Negro, using these words: "On the whole, it seems probable that they are a much inferior race of men to the whites in every respect."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> G. H. Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts*. New York, 1866, p. 256.

<sup>5</sup> *A Forensic Dispute on the Legality of Enslaving the Africans*. Boston, 1773.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Nisbet, *Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture*. Philadelphia, 1773, p. 21.

Replying to the philosophers and advocates of natural rights, Bernard Roman urged: "Let not therefore the narrow system of morality adopted by some of our contemporary enthusiastical Philosophers restrain us from properly using this natural subjected species of mankind. . . ." An extension of this thought of the Negro as a "subjected species" was made by an anonymous writer who considered the Negro as among a "genus" listed as follows: "1st Negroes, 2d Ourang-outang, 3d Apes, 4th Baboons and 5th Monkeys."

The continuance of this idea of Negro inferiority in the midst of revolutionary philosophy reached its climax in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*. Jefferson is the well-known exponent of democracy and a proposer of a plan of emancipation, but he mingles with this a belief in the inferiority of the Negro. He believed that the Negro was intellectually inferior to the whites in reasoning but in memory he was equal to the whites. He wrote, "I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigation of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless and anomalous."<sup>8</sup> He declared, "Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Wheatley, but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism."<sup>9</sup> He admitted that there were Negroes who were good orators, musicians and soldiers. He hesitated to reach definite conclusions on the race, for, wrote he, these "would degrade a whole race of men from the rank of the scale of beings."

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Romans, *A Concise and Natural History of East and West Florida*. New York, 1775, p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> A writer in the *Boston Gazette*, August 19, 1802, exclaimed, "Good God!, Mr. Jefferson, whither does this argument carry you. If every white man were thus to be proscribed because he could not, like you perhaps, trace and comprehend the investigations of Euclid, society we are afraid would soon be woefully thinned in its numbers. . . ."; Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Philadelphia, 1794; *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Ford ed.), New York, 1894. Vol. III, p. 245.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 246.

He finally concluded his observations with the statement, "I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind."<sup>10</sup> At other times, Jefferson seemed to believe in the capacities of the Negro as his well-known letter to Benjamin Banneker indicates and his kind provisions for his own slaves show. It is paradoxical that the author of the Declaration of Independence and of popular government should hold these views of Negro inferiority.

Jefferson also held up the physical differences between Negroes and whites as a basis of inferiority. He suggested that the color of the Negro might be due to the "rectangular membrane between the skin and the scarf-skin or in the scarf-skin itself." The scarcity of hair which had been found on the face and body of the Negro, the lesser amount of secretion from the kidneys and the larger amount through the skin, which produced their peculiar odor, were regarded by Jefferson as physical distinctions marking them off from the whites.<sup>11</sup>

Another writer, in an anonymous pamphlet, stressed the importance of these physical features and endeavored to show that if Negroes were to be civilized, their features and hair would have to be changed. This had happened to the Egyptians, for originally they may have been of the Negro race. The present physical condition of the Negro, he believed, was an obstacle to his mental development.<sup>12</sup> This, however, was not an argument for amalgamation.

Views of Negro inferiority were not confined to unknown writers and to the anonymous but the better known thinkers and writers. They were in the North as well as in the South. New England had its representative, the Middle States, as

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 249.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 245.

<sup>12</sup> *Two Essays. One upon Single View with Two Eyes; the other on Dew. A Letter to the Right Hon. Lloyd, Lord Kenyon and an account of a Female of William Charles Wells.* London, 1818.

did the upper South and the lower South, each from the ranks of the intelligentsia. From Boston, Jared Sparks, historian, college professor and later president of Harvard College, writing in 1824 concerning colonization, stated, "Whatever justice, humanity and kindness we may feel towards them, we cannot help considering them and treating them as our inferiors." This was the period when the discussion of colonization was in its hey-day. It was the beginning of the controversy between the abolitionists and colonizationists which continued for several decades. The thoughts of Sparks and others during these years were influenced by these arguments. Sparks found that color was an impassable barrier between Negroes and whites. He was of the opinion that the whites would never consent and the Negroes could never hope to see the two races placed on a plane of perfect equality. He continued, "Color has become a signal of inferiority by the mere habit of connecting the idea of a slave with that of a dark skin; nor can it be otherwise while the principles of association hold their places among the first elements of the human mind."<sup>13</sup> These opinions were readily accepted by colonizationists who used them as grounds for the continuation of their plan of expatriation.

The idea of physical differences found its champion among the intellectuals of the Middle States in Dr. Samuel Stanhope Smith, later president of Princeton University.<sup>14</sup> He expressed the opinion that the hair of the Negro was mixed with some volatile fluid. The strong bodily odor of Negroes suggested to him that there was in Negroes a possible mixture of sulphur with a large amount of phosphorus. Differences were noted in the skull, face and body which set the Negro apart from other races. He based these dif-

<sup>13</sup> Jared Sparks, *A Historical Outline of the American Colonization Society*. Boston, 1824, pp. 22, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Stanhope Smith, *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*. Philadelphia, 1787.

ferences, however, upon climate and showed a belief in the unity of mankind. Smith quoted Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840) whose researches had attempted a classification of races. Blumenbach believed, according to Smith, that climate influenced the secretive powers of the liver which acted upon the vessels of the skin, and these in turn affected the color and hair.

From the upper South came the voice of Thomas R. Dew, professor of history, metaphysics and political law and later president of William and Mary College. In his account of the debate in the Virginia Legislature on the abolition of slavery, he referred to the Negroes as "a race of people differing from us in color and habits and mostly inferior in the scale of civilization." Dew's purpose was to defend slavery. He traced this institution historically from the ancient world, asserted that it was approved by Christianity and accordingly it was certainly not sinful for superior white men to hold inferior black men in slavery. He opposed the idea that men were created equal and added that "it is the order of nature and of God that the being of superior faculties and knowledge and therefore of superior power should control and dispose of those who are inferior."<sup>15</sup>

The third representative of this group in this period was Chancellor William Harper, of the Supreme Court of South Carolina. In 1837, he read a paper on slavery before the Society for the Advancement of Learning of South Carolina.<sup>16</sup> He drew upon the Bible and ancient philosophers as bases for his arguments in defense of slavery. After deny-

<sup>15</sup> Thomas R. Dew, *A Review of the Debate on the Abolition of Slavery in the Virginia Legislature, 1831-1832*. Richmond, 1832, pp. 2, 30; *The Pro-Slavery Argument: as maintained by the most distinguished writers of the Southern States containing the several essays on this subject, of Chancellor Harper, Governor Hammond, Dr. Simms, and Professor Dew*. Charleston, 1852.

<sup>16</sup> William Harper, *Memoir on Slavery, read before the Society for the Advancement of Learning of South Carolina at its Annual Meeting at Columbia, 1837*. Columbia, 1838, pp. 36-57.

ing the idea of equality, Harper asserted that "the African Negro is an inferior variety of the human race." He stated that the Negro's "distinguishing characteristics are such as peculiarly mark him out for the situation which he occupies among us." Another prominent South Carolinian, John C. Calhoun, who had become more of a national figure during the nullification controversy in 1831-32, declared before the Senate in 1837 that the Negro race from the dawn of history to the present had never attained so civilized a condition and had not been so improved physically, morally and intellectually as they were in the United States.<sup>17</sup> This was a defense of slavery, but it was a defense rooted in the concept of inferiority.

The Biblical argument was advanced by J. Jacobus Flourney in 1835. According to Flourney<sup>18</sup> Ham and his descendants, who were Negroes, were cursed for scoffing at his father. This punishment separated them from the families of Shem and Japheth. Flourney went farther moreover, and argued that Christ had not intended that they should be called "brethren," for if he had, this would have fostered amalgamation. According to Flourney, the original men were either white or red, and black was a degeneration from the standard color. Thus he would place the Negro on the lowest plane of the races.

Two years later, Julien Virey described what he called the natural history of the Negro and based his inferiority upon physical, moral and mental grounds. He said that in natural history one distinguished a species from a race by the permanence of characteristic features. Since he had found that the natural and moral characteristics of Negroes did not change, they constituted a species, distinct from all

<sup>17</sup> John C. Calhoun, *Remarks of Mr. Calhoun of South Carolina on the Reception of Abolition Petitions, delivered in the Senate of the United States, February, 1837*. Washington, 1837, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> J. Jacobus Flourney, *An Essay on the Origin, Habits, etc., of the African Race, incidental to the propriety of having nothing to do with Negroes*; New York, 1835, pp. 4, 5, 9, 10, 53, 54.



other races in the world. In physical characteristics, he said that the Negro resembled the ourang-outang. His forehead was lower than the whites. The teeth were set obliquely, the legs were bent outwards, the calves were very slender and the knees were always half flexed. He stated that when Negro children were born they were a reddish, yellow color but after a week Negro babies became "perfectly black by degrees." The brain in white men was gray or ash-colored but in Negroes the cortical part was black. The bile of Negroes was darker than in whites. In fact, wrote the author, the Negro is not only dark on the exterior parts of his body but in "even the most interior." These characteristics showed a tendency toward an ape genus. In mental powers, he declared that Negroes were close to the ape, also in their capacity for imitation. They worked under necessity and force and were more fitted to be ruled than governed.<sup>19</sup> He listed forty-seven physical differences between the anatomy of the Negro and that of the white man.

The physical differences between the two races were studied by Josiah Nott in 1848. The author stated that the forehead of the Negro was narrower and more receding. This made the intellectual portion of the brain more deficient. The bones in the head were thicker and more dense, which also contributed to mental differences. The nerves coming from the brain were larger, just as was the case in animals. This contributed to the predominance of the senses and the sexual faculties. The author boldly asserted "that the Negro and Indian races are susceptible of the same degree of civilization that the Caucasian is, all history would show, not to be true—that the Caucasian race is deteriorated by intermixing with the inferior race is equally true."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Julien J. Virey, *Natural History of the Negro, Extracted from the French by J. H. Guenebault*. Charleston, 1837, pp. 1, 3, 19, 23, 38, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Josiah Clark Nott, *Two Lectures on the Connection Between the Biblical and Physical History of Man*. Delivered by invitation from the chair of political economy of the Louisiana University in December, 1848. New York, 1849, pp. 23, 41.



The state of African civilization continued also to be a favorite foundation for the charge of inferiority. William J. Grayson, writing in 1845, stated that Negroes had never originated a civilization of their own and that in Africa was found only the crudest barbarism. The Negro, the author stated, could maintain a civilized society only as he was in contact with a superior race.<sup>21</sup>

Another opinion of African inferiority, published in 1845, stressed the higher qualities of the Caucasian who, it was claimed, had in all ages been endowed with considerable civilization. They had been propagators and patrons of the arts and sciences. The author claimed that the Negro races had never rivalled the white races in this respect and had not attained any high degree of civilization. Unless they were in a state of slavery, the author asserted, they seem incapable of reaching a higher scale of development. In Africa, he said that agriculture was not worth the mention and the forests still stood in their "primitive grandeur." He found that in religion Africa was in a backward state, that there was no rational idea about religious worship and that cruelties were practised in the name of religion. The author said that he found no trace of ancient art or of advancement in the arts of civilization.<sup>22</sup>

According to William C. Buck, conditions in Africa prior to 1619, when the first Negroes were introduced to the English colonies, and 1848, when he was writing, were about the same. His opinion was that Africa had been inhabited by the most degraded, ignorant and barbarous people in the world. The writer stated that Africans were pagan idol worshippers; they were engaged in wars and in enslaving captives and they were in the thickest moral darkness.<sup>23</sup>

The Compromise of 1850 with its amended Fugitive

<sup>21</sup> William J. Grayson, *Slavery in the South; a review of Hammond's and Fuller's letters, and Chancellor Harper's Memoir on the subject*. 1846, p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Estes, *A Defense of Negro Slavery as it Exists in the United States*. Montgomery, 1846, pp. 49, 50, 51, 53.

<sup>23</sup> William C. Buck, *The Slavery Question*. Louisville, 1849, p. 16.

Slave Act, the passage of the Personal Liberty Laws, the publication and wide circulation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the organization of the Republican Party with its program of the non-extension of slavery, the Dred Scott Decision, and the continuation of the abolition crusade were factors in creating greater interest in the efforts to prove the premise of the inferiority of the Negro. If this could be demonstrated, it was believed, slavery would be more readily recognized as the status of the Negro, and the arguments of the abolitionists would then be silenced. The basis of pro-slavery thought was the belief in Negro inferiority.

Accordingly, the consideration of the then well-recognized tradition about Africa was given more extensive publicity. John Fletcher, writing in 1852, stated that Negroes in Africa were in a state of total brutality. They were cannibals, idolaters and savages. His information had come from a traveler who had spent twelve years in Africa. He had said that wild beasts did not show any greater moral degradation than Negroes in Africa and that even in America when several generations were removed from Africa, they were still barbarous in their habits. History could give no knowledge of African tribes. He stated that for four thousand years their condition had been stationary and there was no evidence of achievement in civilization. In view of this condition the Southern states had determined not to have them received on a basis of equality, for the families of slaveholders were taught that the Negro was inferior to the white man in moral capacity, mental power and physical ability.<sup>24</sup> In the previous year, John Campbell had contended in his *Negro Mania* that the Negro even in Egyptian civilization was relegated to an inferior status.<sup>25</sup>

The Scriptural basis of inferiority continued to appear

<sup>24</sup> John Fletcher, *Studies on Slavery in Easy Lessons. Comp. into eight studies and subdivided into short lessons for the convenience of the reader.* Natchez, 1852.

<sup>25</sup> John Campbell, *Negro Mania, Being an Examination of the Falsely Assumed Equality of the Races of Mankind.* Philadelphia, 1851.

in public print. Josiah Priest declared the curse of Ham signified that he had been a bad son from childhood. Wrote he, "The curse which had slumbered long was let loose upon him and his posterity, as a general thing, placing them under the ban of slavery on account of his and their foreseen characters."<sup>26</sup> Priest regarded white as the sign of life. The face of the earth was once an ocean of blackness, he wrote, and light which is white was the first sign of created life. In addition, he contended that "God is light," and that black has been considered for ages as degrading. He believed that God had made the white man superior and placed the Negro under his control. The evidence which he assembled, the author stated, showed the universal mental inferiority of the Negro. He did not believe, as did the abolitionists, that Negroes were authors of the arts and sciences in Ancient Egypt. According to Priest, outstanding men had stated that the Negro was in a low and miserable condition for thousands of years. No people had shown such a state of ignorance, he wrote, as the Negroes. Moreover, the fact that the Negro so closely resembled the ourang-outang in his physical being proved that the Negroes were inferior to the whites. Since the two races, black and white, differed so widely mentally and physically, the author believed that this was a reason why they should not amalgamate. Since the creator had assigned Negroes to an inferior position, it would amount to nothing to give them political equality. Priest declared that free Negroes, even in the New England states, had not elevated their characters or conditions.

George Fitzhugh, writing in 1857, gave voice to similar expressions of inferiority in his *Cannibals All! or Slaves Without Masters*.<sup>27</sup> Dr. S. A. Cartwright of Louisiana in

<sup>26</sup> Rev. Josiah Priest, *Bible Defense of Slavery and the Origin, Fortunes and History of the Negro Race*. Glasgow, Kentucky, 1852. (Published first, Albany, 1843, as *Slavery, as it relates to the Negro or African Race*.)

<sup>27</sup> George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! or Slaves without Masters!* Richmond, 1857.

*De Bow's Review* for 1860 carried the Biblical argument into absurdity, when he stated that the serpent which tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden was a Negro. He said that the Hebrew word "Naphesh" translated "serpent" should have been interpreted "Negro."<sup>28</sup>

It was said in 1858, in *Ought American Slavery to be Perpetuated*, that aside from the Scriptures, the indolence of the Negro marked him off from the rest of mankind as an inferior being. It was insisted that the Negro had disobeyed the natural law that man must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. On the contrary, he had declined to labor in his native land and develop its resources. Such indolence, it was stated, had reduced the Negro to savage barbarity.<sup>29</sup>

The two races could not exist upon an equal basis, but they could exist as superior and inferior, it was claimed by Herbert Fielder.<sup>30</sup> He said that the status of the lower grades of white people was improved by the presence of the inferior race. He continued that no white man in Georgia could associate with a Negro on equal terms without losing respect for himself and for the Negro. Moreover, the mental attitude of the Negro inclined him to accept the subordinate position.

A similar view was taken by Sidney George Fisher, lawyer and author, in 1860 in attempting to prove that the white race was the highest of all races and the Negro the lowest. He described the average size of the brain of a white man as ninety-two cubic inches and that of a Negro was eighty-three cubic inches. Therefore, he concluded, that the whites have the greater mental and moral energy. The Negro was then an inferior and should be subordinate

<sup>28</sup> *De Bow's Review*, Vol. XXIX, O. S., pp. 130-131.

<sup>29</sup> W. G. Brownlow, *Ought American Slavery to be Perpetuated. A Debate between Rev. W. G. Brownlow and Rev. A. Pryme, Held at Philadelphia*, September, 1858. Philadelphia, 1858, pp. 205, 214.

<sup>30</sup> Herbert Fielder, *The Disunionist, a Brief Treatise upon the Evils of the Union between the North and the South*. Georgia, 1858.

and the only terms upon which he could live with the white man was upon a basis of inequality.<sup>31</sup>

Comparisons were made not only with the Negro in his original African home but in the Northern and Southern states. E. N. Elliott, whose *Cotton is King* was a well known propaganda document, described the degraded condition of the Negroes in the Northern states and particularly in Massachusetts. He called attention to their percentage in the population and to their larger percentage in crime. He declared that the Negro was of savage origin and insisted, "The savage, liberated from bondage, is a savage still."<sup>32</sup> The same author in the following year reprinted his article, *Slavery in the Light of International Law*, which again defended the thesis of racial inferiority.<sup>33</sup> Neither the Declaration of Independence nor the early laws of the states contemplated the equality of Negroes, the author asserted.

That such views were not held only by poor whites, the ignorant and misguided is further substantiated by reference to Samuel Finley Breese Morse, the inventor of the telegraph. Morse, in 1863, wrote a brochure under the title, "*An Argument on the Ethical Position of Slavery in the Social System and Its Relation to the Politics of the Day*."<sup>34</sup> Morse contended that the fact of the physical differences between the races was at the root of the controversy over slavery. He stated that slavery was the natural condition for the Negro and that if the two races were to live together the superior should control the inferior.

The work of Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (1816-

<sup>31</sup> Sidney George Fisher, *The Laws of Race as Connected with Slavery*. Philadelphia, 1860, pp. 10, 11, 14.

<sup>32</sup> E. N. Elliott, *Cotton Is King and Pro-Slavery Arguments*. Augusta, 1860, pp. 37-43.

<sup>33</sup> Confer ante.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Finley Breese Morse, *An Argument on the Ethical Position of Slavery in the Social System and Its Relation to the Politics of the Day*. New York, 1863.

1882) has historical significance in connection with the concept of race inferiority in this period. He brought together various observations on race into a comprehensive and powerful essay. This work, in four volumes, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* appeared first in 1853-55. An English translation appeared in the United States in 1860.<sup>35</sup> This book declared boldly that the white race was superior to the colored races and that the lowest in the scale of racial types were the darker races. Animal tendencies stamped the Negro with the mark of inferiority. He believed that civilization arose only where one race conquered another. "I convinced myself," he wrote in his famous opus, "that everything great, noble and fruitful in the work of man on this earth, in science, art and civilization, is derived from a single starting point; it belongs to one family alone, the different branches of which have ruled in all civilized countries." He further stated, "The white race originally possessed the monopoly of beauty, intelligence and strength, by its union with other varieties hybrids were created, which were beautiful without strength, strong without intelligence, or, if intelligent, both weak and ugly." The superior race which Gobineau was writing about was the so-called "Aryan" race. Modern racial philosophies are descendants of this theory. Germanic authorities have claimed that the Germans are the finest example of the Aryan race, although the definitions of "Aryan" and of "race" are indefinite. In fact, in spite of Gobineau, no one seems to know what a "race" is, as we also do not know, as has been said before, what a "Negro" is. This book, however, has been widely read and quoted in the United States.

Another exponent of Negro inferiority in this decade was Hinton Rowan Helper of North Carolina. His most widely publicized work, *The Impending Crisis of the South*:

<sup>35</sup> Comte Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, *The Moral and Intellectual Diversity of Races with Particular Reference to Their Respective Influence in the Civil and Political History of Mankind*. From the French with historical notes by H. Hotz. Philadelphia, 1860.

*How to Meet It*, was published in 1857. This book was regarded as antislavery propaganda because it showed the effects of slavery on the South, but Helper's later writings proved that he believed in the inferiority of the Negro. He showed this in his *La Nojoque*, published in 1867.<sup>36</sup> He stated that the purpose of the book was to write the Negro out of America. While opposed to slavery, he definitely believed in Negro inferiority. He regarded Negroes as the most degraded race among men. Their physical forms approached nearest to the animals, he said, and they had never arrived at the point of systematic knowledge. He said that the Negro himself believed in the superiority of the white man. The belief concerning Negroes is demonstrated in this sentence: "In no age, in no part of the world, have they, of themselves, ever projected or advanced any public or private interest, nor given expression to any thought or sentiment that could worthily elicit the praise or even the favorable mention, of the better portion of mankind."

A year later in 1868, he published a second work, *Negroes in Negroland*.<sup>37</sup> He quoted liberally from other travelers and writers in order to demonstrate that there was an abject and degraded condition for Negroes in Africa. He declared that "in nothing that ennobles mankind has a Negro ever distinguished himself." He found neither in the desert nor in central Africa the march of civilization. There was nothing there, he said, to correspond to the situation in Mexico and Peru. He then proceeds to demonstrate the Negro's low status in the United States. The Negro's mind, he said, ceased to expand after the age of fourteen, and he had neither invention, nor judgment, nor imagination, nor talents for the same.<sup>38</sup>

Can there be any amazement, in the face of these argu-

<sup>36</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *La Nojoque: A Question for a Continent*. New York and London, 1867, pp. 16, 18, 19. See also Hugh T. Lefler, *Hinton Rowan Helper, Advocate of a "White America."* Charlottesville, 1935.

<sup>37</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *Negroes in Negroland*. New York, 1868.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212, *passim*.



ments, that the Negro was kept in slavery and that slavery was defended by so-called intelligent public opinion? Can there be any amazement that the Negro was generally regarded as an inferior, when books and pamphlets with this spurious stuff were frequently being broadcast free of charge? The published material by abolitionists was equally as emotional and as propagandistic as the material issued by their opponents. The Negro was neither a dear old Uncle Tom nor a radical Nat Turner, nor anyone of the types they would draw. He was all of these and more. He was just a human being. But these, and other written defenses of Negro equality were in the main argumentative, sentimental or so qualified in their presentation as to be valueless in affecting opinion.

Since these periods, various studies have been made of the Negro.<sup>39</sup> His physical abilities and weaknesses, and mental capacities have been subjected to investigation. The brain and the head have been weighed and measured. Anatomical differences of many types have been examined. Tendencies to special diseases have been investigated. The psychological approach has been attempted to secure light upon racial peculiarities, and intelligence testing along racial lines has become quite a fad. Assumptions of inferiority based upon Biblical quotations no longer color scientific studies. It is still true, however, that the purpose to keep the Negro subordinate is the occasion for the continuation of propaganda and misinformation rather than the truth as revealed by the facts. Surface differences be-

<sup>39</sup> For a survey of this material, see "The Physical and Mental Abilities of the American Negro" in *The Journal of Negro Education*, Year Book III, Vol. III, No. 3, July, 1934; additional material may be found in William S. Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South*. Chapel Hill, 1935; Henrietta A. Tolbert, "A Study of the Doctrine of the Inferiority of the Negro in American History," an unpublished Master of Arts' thesis, Howard University, 1939; Franz Boaz, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, New York, 1938; William P. Calhoun, *The Caucasian and the Negro in the United States*. Columbia, 1902; Frank H. Hankins, *The Racial Basis of Civilization*. New York, 1931; Jacques Barzun, *Race: A Study in Modern Superstition*. New York, 1937.



tween the races have continued to be the bases for the belief in mental differences and in lesser attainments for some racial groups as contrasted with others. In spite of these efforts, we still reach the conclusion today that inherent racial inequality has not been proved. On the contrary, opinions today favor the equality of racial potentialities. It is claimed that achievement has been conditioned by inequality of opportunity, and it is also quite evident that this has prevented the realization of potentialities by races and classes.

The situation remains serious, however, when Edward Channing, Harvard professor, in his sixth volume of a *History of the United States*, can state after what he calls research in African sources, "Reading these many accounts, weighing them, and trying to draw judgment from them, it appears that it is about as hard for the Ethiop to change his institutional and racial conceptions as it is for him to alter the color of his skin. Both his institutions and his skin are matters of heredity. They have come down from a very remote past and are, even today, being handed on unchanged to future generations." He continues, "In his pure condition undiluted by white or yellow blood, the Negro is essentially a communist and a fatalist." This was written in 1925. Similar utterances have been made subsequently by other professors of the social sciences.

Here, then, is the challenge to American scholars, Negro and white, for the days of race propaganda continue. It is still believed by many so-called scholars that God and man must have superior races. Today, as the propagation of the superiority of races goes forward under Hitler, Mussolini, the Ku Klux Klan modernized and the Fascist colored shirt organizations, it is imperative that we study again the capacity of races. Historians of the Negro peoples should direct attention to Africa and the Africans. These African peoples should be rescued from oblivion and from the belief in their savagery, barbarism and inferiority.

They should be saved also from the contemporary traveler and missionary who too often have no sympathetic understanding of their culture and achievements and no conception of their history. They see so often only the present and forget the more glorious past. The Negro in the United States must be viewed without blind prejudice and his contributions to American life and history should be included with those of other peoples. When this is done, without doubt some Negroes will appear inferior to some whites and some whites will appear inferior to some Negroes. Any other position is contrary to the facts and their logical interpretations.

Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History during a quarter of a century have been giving answer to the absurd, irrational and emotional arguments advanced by the advocates of race superiority. This organization has demonstrated that the answers to race assumptions are best presented scientifically and not by writing the same type of material. It is not that there is needed an answer to a *Race Traits and Tendencies* phrased in denials or an argumentative "open letter" on the equality of the races. We need solid achievements by Negro scholars and workers and the steady onward march of the masses.

From the period of *Freedom's Journal* in 1827, the first Negro newspaper, to the most recently issued Negro newspaper today, denial, defense and refutation by wordy argument have been maintained. This first Negro paper challenged authorities to prove the alleged inferiority of the Negro. The editors asserted, "Then, and then only, shall we be convinced that really we are a different species, and not a variety, and that the Creator has, in His providence designed us for hewers of wood and drawers of water and beasts of burden for our fairer brethren."<sup>40</sup> While these defenses have their place, we need more than this, with

<sup>40</sup> *Freedom's Journal*. Vol. I, No. 12, June 1, 1827, p. 47.

pseudo-scientific thought of race inferiority still so active today.

There is need for anatomists, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, scientists of the several fields and psychologists who can give refinement and definition to racial concepts and, if the evidence warrants, explode the concept of Negro inferiority. But they too must be actively on guard against the motivation towards racial equality, which resists findings contrary to our egotistic group desires. The scholarly inclined will seek the truth wherever it may lead. Moreover, they will become scholars in their own chosen specialties, which in itself defeats the concept of inferiority. Then there can be presented the facts in pamphlets, books and printed forms so that American thought may see another side of the picture. The distribution and circulation of this material among readers is the second step removed from its preparation. Here lies the task for all of us. If American thought is to be freed from its concept of Negro inferiority, it will be because there are first achievers, whom history can tell us about, then writers of the truth, who are increasing in number through the work of this association, and readers of the truth, who, having emancipated themselves, are seeking the emancipation of others.

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